

Helen Ferris



By Matthew
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Quotation from A Grief Observed. C.S. Lewis, Copyright 1961. Harper Collins Edition, 2001

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“For dust thou art and to dust thou shall return.”

Helen Ferris sat in the front row of her church as the pastor gave her brother’s eulogy. Nathan had passed away just days before from injuries relating to a car wreck. Now, as his closest remaining relative, she had been responsible for the funeral arrangements.

He had been briefly married, but had had no children. He’d been a widower longer than he’d been a husband, and had never even considered remarrying. Something he had in common with his younger sister. For Helen had lost her husband as well.

She looked at the people sitting next to her. Of course, she at least had her son, Mike, and his wife, Vinnie. Mike squeezed his mother’s hand and had his

arm around Vinnie. Even sitting down, his wife's rounded belly was obvious. Not even fifty yet, Helen would soon be a grandmother.

"The Lord gives and the Lord taketh away," the preacher continued. "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Indeed. All true. Yet somehow so impersonal.

Helen supposed that she should give the pastor more patience and charity. After all, he was still a young man, and hadn't known Nathan that well. Not many people had, and most of those just professionally. Nathan had been head of the family moving business, but otherwise had had little or no social life. With few friends and fewer interests, he had been known as 'weird Nathan' even when they were kids.

How many people really knew him? How many more had really cared?

The eulogy ended before Helen even realized it. The striking up of sad music and the rustle of people near her alerted Helen to what was happening. People were approaching her. People coming to hug her. People coming to give the standard condolences to go along with the standard funeral.

He's no longer suffering. He's in a better place. At least he knew Jesus. At least he's back with his Elaine.

Indeed. All true. Yet somehow so impersonal.

"Excuse me," she quietly told Mike. She stood and headed out of the sanctuary before the crowd could reach her. Going into the narthex, she looked at the table that had Nathan's pictures and assorted memorabilia. His business degree from Oakwood University. His Eagle Scout medal. Several books, ancient and modern. Nathan had been an avid reader.

Helen wondered how many people had even known that much about him.

The restroom was off to the left. She ducked in to look at herself in the mirror. The face of a middle aged Midwestern woman stared back at her. She had bright blue eyes that now had streaks of mascara running from them. Her hair was a shade of brown that had a reddish tint during the summer and more grey the longer she lived. She had neither dyed it nor cut it shorter, despite remembering that her mother believed that long hair in women over forty looked 'stringy.' Helen neither wanted to look younger than she really was, nor older, which is how she would look if she cut her hair.

She dabbed her eyes with a paper towel, after wetting it in the sink. Nathan had said that it was pointless to deny one's age either way, and besides, why bother? Youth may have the advantages of energy and

open mindedness, but was also silly and rash. Age had dignity and wisdom if it could avoid bitterness and stubbornness. Best to embrace both in their time.

Nathan often talked that way with her. About life. About real things. He had never been good at so called small talk, so often was quiet around others.

“Most people only want to talk about politics and football,” Nathan had once observed. “And I don’t care about either.”



But when you did care about someone or something, Nathan, you gave your whole heart, Helen thought. If only more people could have known. She sighed, and washed her face. She was crying. Not sobbing, but she looked like she had been.

“Helen?”

She turned around and saw Kathy Matheson in the doorway. Her friend since high school, Kathy was also Vinnie's mother. She stepped into the bathroom and hugged Helen.

"Sorry," she told Kathy. "Just need to..."

"I know, Helen. I know."

Helen looked at herself in the mirror again. "You know," she remarked. "So many people thought Nathan and I were twins. We looked so much alike. But he was almost two years older."

"It was the eyes. You had...have...such pretty eyes."

"So does Mike," Helen replied. "God willing, so will our grandbaby."

"Are you ready?"

"Is anyone?"

Kathy smiled sheepishly. “No, I mean are you ready to go back out?”

“No. But I have to. Just like when Mike died. I had to step up as a single mother.”

She meant Mike Ferris, Sr., her late husband. He had died when their son, Mike Jr., had been a baby. There had been a lot of losses over a short period of time. First, there had been an epidemic that had killed her parents, Nathan’s wife Elaine, and almost half the town of Oakwood. Then her husband had had an accident. Now, twenty years after that, she was burying her brother.

She hadn’t had the luxury of grieving for long back then. Her son had needed her, and she had been able to watch him grow into a fine young man. Now though, she felt like she had more time to mourn.

Helen felt neither anger, nor despair. Mostly, she felt sad that so few people had really known Nathan. She had been the closest to him. The one who kept him from withdrawing from the world more than he already had. The one who had helped him through the difficult months after their parents and Elaine had passed. She hadn't had the time to feel sorry for herself because she was caring for him and Mike Jr.

Now, one was grown  and the other was gone. What happens next, then? Had any of it even mattered? What impact had she really had since he was gone now anyway?

"Come on," Kathy said, gently pulling her back into the narthex. Helen's eyes rested on a printed quote that Nathan had liked. It was a quote from, of all people, Jack Kirby, the legendary comic book author and artist.

'Life at best is bittersweet.'

Indeed. All true.

After the funeral, Helen and Mike scheduled an estate sale at Nathan's house. She was his sole heir, but the family heirlooms, such as they were, had already passed down to her son. Nothing really sentimental remained of her brother's things. The sooner they got rid of them and sold the house, the better, she supposed.

"Hi, Helen," a familiar voice greeted. She turned and saw Ed Thomas, a retired detective and old friend of the family.

"Sorry I didn't make the funeral. But I had to help my daughter, Keisha, move into her new apartment."

Thomas was a tall, athletic black man with a shaved head and neatly trimmed mustache. Next to her was a pretty young woman in army fatigues.

“I don’t think you’ve met Keisha,” Thomas continued, indicating the girl. “She’s in the Army Reserves.”

“Hello, Ms. Ferris,” Keisha said. “Sorry about your loss.”

“Thank you. And please, Helen. The only people who call me Ms. Ferris are clients or solicitors.”

“Well...” Keisha laughed nervously. “I don’t want to sound like a vulture, but I was looking for some furniture.”

“That’s not really why we came,” Ed pointedly told both Helen and Keisha.

“No, I know. I’m trying to get rid of stuff.” She raised her eyebrows. “Where are you living? Here?”

“Close by,” Keisha told her. “There’s an apartment complex at the county line, where Mooresville used to be.”

“Really? Mooresville has been a ghost town for years. I don’t think anything’s left except the cemetery.”

“There’s a video game company there now too,” Keisha told her.

“Are they building it back up? Why now, after all this time?”



“Cheap real estate. I don’t think much else is going in, though. The apartments are mainly for the software engineers who work for the company. I have some friends there, and come in and out of the area on assignments. I found a good deal, and it keeps me close to dad.”

She hugged Ed, who smiled and turned his attention to Mike. “Speaking of dads, I heard you’re ready to become one, Mike. Congratulations.”

“Thank you sir,” Mike said.

“One generation passes into another,” Helen said drily.

“Nathan?” Thomas asked.

“Ecclesiastes. But it was Nathan’s favorite book of the Bible,” Helen corrected. “I’m having Ecc. 12:13-14 carved on his tombstone. I think he’d like that.”

“How are you holding up, Helen?” Ed asked.
“Seriously?”

“Never better.”

“Come on.”

She ran a hand through her hair. "All right. I want to get drunk, pass out, and get drunk again."

Thomas snorted. "Well, at least you're honest."

"Oh, Ed. Nothing stays the same, does it?"

She looked around at the crowds going through her brother's things. They had every right to, of course. She had arranged for this event. She wanted to get rid of this stuff. There was nothing she wanted. Still...



She remembered another conversation she had had with her brother. About Greek philosophers and about how they gauged something to be 'real' by how long it lasted. The longer lasting, the more real things were supposed to be. The eternal was the most real of all, for it was beyond time. Permanent. Unchanging.

What did that make people? They always changed. Even places did, evidently. The old Mooresville site was

now being developed. How long would Oakwood have before she couldn't even recognize it?

"No, Helen. I guess not," Thomas confessed.

After the sale, Helen drove down the road toward Lester's. The service station where Kathy worked also had a small deli, and she didn't feel like cooking tonight. Until recently, she would cook a few days worth of whatever she had and take some over to her brother. That was when they talked. Helen would talk about her life, and Nathan would talk about life.

That was the past now. While Helen didn't mind leftovers herself, there was nothing made and she wasn't in the best of moods. She'd make herself talk to Kathy.

As she parked and walked up to the door, she noticed a homeless man approaching her. She supposed

that she shouldn't just assume, but he had the traditional unkempt grey hair and beard, grey baggy clothes, and was pushing a shopping cart with various odds and ends.

Sure enough, when he got close to her, he stopped and waved.

"Hey. You have any money?"

Helen looked him over. For a moment, she thought he looked not too unlike Nathan. Her brother had let his appearance go late in life, letting his hair and beard grow out too. This man appeared both younger and older than Nathan. More wrinkles, greyer in the eyes, although he had a more serene, even contented look than her brother.

Which made Helen wonder at the man's background. Was he homeless by circumstance or choice? She had never seen him before. While there was

the occasional vagabond that came through town via the highway, neither Oakwood nor Matheson County had a huge homeless problem.

“I don’t have any money,” Helen answered. Which was true; she only had her credit card. So if he wanted alcohol, he would be disappointed.

“Are you hungry? I’ll buy you something for dinner.”

“Thank you,” the man said. “Haven’t had anything all day.”



Well, she thought, maybe he really does need help.

She opened the door for him. The man left his cart outside and went in. Helen followed him and looked around. The half dozen or so tables were empty, but Kathy was there.

“Helen? What’s going on?”

“Hi, Kathy. I didn’t feel like cooking. Just got back from the estate sale.”

“How was it?”

“It sure was. I’ll have a coffee and a couple roast beefs.”

She turned to the man. How about you, mister...”

“Calvin Colon. Call me Cal. The same for me I guess. Thanks again.”



“You’re welcome. I’m Helen Ferris.” She extended her hand and shook the man’s. It was cold, despite being covered in fingerless gloves. Of course, it wasn’t particularly warm outside, and he had probably been wandering all day.

Kathy brought their food and Helen introduced Cal to her.

“Where did you come from?” their host asked before Helen could.

“Indianapolis. I’m heading to Louisville,” Cal responded. “I heard from some guys that the shelters are better there.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, but there’s nothing to lose.”

“No family? No friends?” Helen asked.



He shook his head. “Laid off from a courier service I worked at for years. Government benefits ran out too.”

“Disability?”

“VA. I did a couple tours in Iraq.”

“Thank you for your service,” Helen answered.

“Really. My brother went to Iraq in 2003, and my dad

fought in Vietnam. I've always had respect for the soldiers."

"Good. Good," Cal nodded approvingly. "I'd love to talk to them sometime."

Helen looked down. "Dad died when the epidemic hit Oakwood."

"Covid?"

"No. There was an outbreak of pneumonia in 2006.  Half the town died."

"It was all over the news," Kathy remarked.

"I don't remember," Cal confessed. "But then, I never watched the news that much."

That was another way Cal reminded Helen of Nathan. He had avoided news and magazines, choosing

to stay informed through older books. It kept him behind, but he always said they were less biased.

They ate for a moment in silence. Then Cal ventured a question.

“Your brother has passed away too, hasn’t he? Recently?”

Helen looked up. “How could you know that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t. But there was something in your eyes. Sorrow. I’ve seen enough of it to recognize it.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Would you like to talk about it? I mean, I don’t want to pry, but...”

Cal trailed off, somewhat embarrassed. But Helen didn't get angry. She just shook her head. "It's a long story."

She felt that Cal was who and what he said he was. A down on his luck veteran whom the system had forgotten. Like too many who had served. Still, she only just met him.

"Maybe it would do you some good," Kathy suggested. "I'm here too.  No one else is."

"Well...I'd have to tell you something about dad first..."

1996

Helen's eyes snapped open. Glancing at her alarm clock, she saw that it was three in the morning. School was four hours away. She grunted, and rolled over,

about to go back to sleep when she heard muffled arguing downstairs.

She got up and opened the door. It sounded like her parents. While she knew it wasn't her business, Helen still crept down the hall. She glanced off to the side into her brother's open room. Nathan, two years older, was snoring under several blankets. It was fall, and he could sleep through just about anything.

Must be nice, she thought.

Downstairs, she saw her parents, David and Anna, in the kitchen. Her father was a wiry man with thin hair and a nervous face. Anna was a small woman with red hair and thick glasses.

"It's not real," Anna was telling David, as he was pacing the kitchen floor. Helen knew what was happening. Her father had been dreaming about combat

again. He was a Vietnam vet, and often had bad dreams. Dreams he never discussed, despite Anna constantly trying to get him to get therapy.

“You think I don’t know that?” David argued.

“You’ve said that a thousand times before, but it doesn’t help. It doesn’t help!”

“Dad?” Helen came down.

“Helen, go to bed,” her mother said in an exasperated tone of voice. 

Helen didn’t, instead hugging her father tightly. It hadn’t been the first time, and while these episodes had decreased over time, they never completely vanished.

In fact, when she and Nathan had been younger, Anna had almost walked out on him, as he refused to get help. David Paxton insisted that not only could no one

help him, but people didn't like Vietnam vets. He'd never forgotten the late sixties and early seventies.

David put his arms around Helen. She alone seemed to calm him, to make him pull himself back together. He realized, even without Anna's reminders that he had to model strength and stability for his children. Helen was the one who reached out to him. Nathan, even when awake, tended to withdraw when their father felt a panic attack coming.



"It's okay, sweetie," David told her. And indeed, he did seem calmer, even if he was forcing himself to be.

"You sure?" Helen asked.

"Yeah. Course I am. Just bad dreams, that's all."

"David," Anna began.

"Fine," he insisted. He released his daughter and held her at arm's length. "Okay? You can go back to bed now. Go on."

He kissed her forehead. Helen kissed him on the cheek and, with a sidelong glance at her mother, went back upstairs. They kept talking but in lower voices, so she supposed the crisis was averted. Still, she only slept fitfully at best until the alarm once again got her out of bed.

She went down to find breakfast made, and her father drinking coffee. His distress from the earlier morning had indeed vanished. He looked up and smiled at her.

The door opened, and Nathan walked inside, already decked out in his winter coat. He was a senior and had his own car so he'd been warming it up.

"Morning, Nathan," she called to him.

"Sis."

He poured himself some coffee and began eating the dry cereal in front of him. He never used milk; it was one of his many quirks. Helen did, but given the cold, she warmed it up in the microwave before pouring it on her oats.

"Hey Nathan, do you want to take me to school?" she asked. "So I don't have to ride the bus?"

"Do I want to?"

"How about you do whether you want to or not?"



David interjected. "Diving's a privilege, not a right."

"Please? It's a lot better than a cold bus stop."

Nathan looked from Helen to David. "All right. Whatever."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Nathan. I do appreciate it."

"Whatever."

"I had another reason for wanting to go with you,"
Helen told her brother as they drove to the high school.
"Dad had a nightmare again this morning."

That made Nathan forget his mild annoyance at her.
"Really? I thought he was over that."

"I don't think he'll ever really be over it," Helen said.

"Mom up too?"

"Yeah."

"Still nagging him for counseling?"



"It's not nagging. She wants him to get help."

"Can't make him. Can't make anyone do anything."

Nathan eyed her. "Well, almost."

Their father only rarely became angry. When he did,
it was frightening to Nathan. Hence why he withdrew
far more than he engaged.

"You shouldn't push him either," Nathan continued
as he rounded a corner. "I mean, dad's functional. He

runs his own business. It's not like he has flashbacks or is an alcoholic or anything like that. Just the occasional nightmare that rattles him. And come on, he probably saw stuff that would give Steven King nightmares."

"Did he ever tell you about it?" Helen asked. "He hasn't to me."

"No. And you shouldn't ask him either."

He looked ahead. "Of course, that's a difference between men and women. How they show they care, I mean. Women reach out. Men stay out of the way."

That was typical Nathan. He was always thinking about life. It was one of the reasons why he was 'weird Nathan' to most of their classmates. He didn't really care; his friends were mostly in Scouts anyway.

"I can't take you home," he told her as they pulled into the parking lot. "I have to work right after school."

Their father owned a small moving company. It was almost a foregone conclusion that they would get business degrees at the local Oakwood University and take it over as adults. Still, David had insisted Nathan get a job on his own first, both to see how other companies worked and to say that nothing was going to be handed to them. Helen, eventually, would too, but hadn't yet. She had to study more than him, and had an extracurricular activity of her own.



"That's okay. I have to stay after school anyway and interview the football team for the school paper," she told him. "I'll get a ride with Kathy or someone."

"Yay, sportball." Nathan found sports to be boring.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't you like anything?"

"Sure I do." Nathan smiled, looking out the car window.

Tina Ward walked by on her way to the school entrance. Blond and beautiful, she was Nathan's class president, an officer in the National Honor Society, and active in half a dozen other clubs and teams. She'd most likely be class valedictorian and voted most likely to succeed.

Nathan found her gorgeous. Helen found her stuck up.

She didn't even look in the direction of the Paxtons. Nathan's gaze, however, followed her every move until she entered the school. Helen rolled her eyes at them both.

"Don't stare. She'll just think you're creepy."

"Yeah." Nathan sighed and got out of the car. Helen followed him in and they went their separate ways.

After school, Helen was on the football field, camera in hand, snapping pictures. The school paper had its own equipment, including a darkroom that the photography class used to develop the newspaper pictures. Helen considered taking photography next year, if she could fit it in. Not that she saw any career for herself in it, but it was fun.

The players ran around the field to warm down as the cheerleaders did their choreography off to the side. She saw Tina there, the team captain, and her friend, Kathy. Like Tina, Kathy Lester's family was fairly well to do, because they owned the service station in town. Well to do by Oakwood standards, that is. She was much friendlier, however, and Helen waved to her just as a couple of football players came up.

One was Kevin Matheson, Kathy's steady boyfriend. The other was someone she didn't recognize. A young

man with dark hair and eyes, he stood about a foot taller than her. Muscular and handsome, he smiled at her and the other girls.

"Hi. You here to scout the local talent?"

"Huh?" Helen didn't register the question at first.

The new quarterback pointed at her camera and smiled again.

"Oh! No, I...I'm with the school paper," she stammered. "I'm Helen Paxton."



"Mike Ferris," he replied.

"Mike's new here," Kevin explained as Kathy walked up and put her arm around him. "Moved from Rodman. He's going to be our secret weapon."

"Why's that?"

Mike shrugged. "Been playing my whole life. Competed there at Rodman High until we moved."

"Right. He knows everything about them." Kevin grinned. "With him as my co captain, we have next game in the bag."

"Co captain? Is that a thing?" Helen asked.

"Assuming I'm not a plant to sabotage you," Mike said. "Some of those guys were still friends when I left."

They looked at him, and he laughed. "I'm just kidding. Probably."

They all had a laugh at that, and Helen asked a few more questions. She also got a picture of Kevin, Mike and Kathy. A new player, from their rivals, no less, would make an excellent story.

"Well, we should get going," Kathy said. She kissed Kevin. "Hit the showers, boys."

"Nice meeting you," Helen said to Mike.

"Yeah, you too. See you around."

He nodded and Kevin walked him to the door leading to the locker rooms.

"She's cute," Mike told Kevin as they left the field.

Kevin made an indifferent noise.

"What? You don't think so?"

"Too skinny for my tastes," Kevin said. "Besides, she looks too much like her weirdo brother."

Mike glanced over his shoulder at the retreating girls. "I like her anyway," he decided.



The next day, Helen was in the school library during lunch hour. She was flipping through some books on football, trying to make sure she understood all the terms.

"Hey. Helen, isn't it?"

She turned and saw Mike there.

"Hi." She pulled the book to herself and looked down, suddenly shy.

"What's going on?"

"Researching football. I'm not exactly an expert."

"Anything in particular?"

Helen sat at a nearby table. Mike joined her and patiently answered the questions she had. He also mentioned that he shared a class with Nathan and had been put in a study group with him.



"Will you be at the game this Friday?" he asked suddenly.

"Maybe," she answered. "Someone from the paper will be there. Of course, everyone in the class wants to and there's only one free ticket."

"Well, I think I can fix that."

He fished in his pocket and pulled out a ticket.

"My dad bought a few tickets for the family. But my sister has to babysit, so I have an extra one. Interested?"

"Uh, sure. Okay. Thanks."

He handed the ticket over. "Thank me by being there."

That evening, Helen sat to dinner with her family.

"So, I have some good news," she told them. "I asked my journalism teacher if I could cover the football game this Friday, and he said yes."

"That's nice, honey," Anna replied.

"Wait, weren't we going out to eat this Friday?" David asked. They usually went out to eat once a month to give Anna a break and to share some family time. She had forgotten that this was the weekend.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Dad."

He shrugged. "Well, you still have another day at school, and your grade won't suffer, will it? Just trade assignments."

"Yeah, well..."

"You're not really a diehard football fan anyway, are you?"

"Well actually..." She twirled a lock of her hair nervously. "See, one of the players gave me a ticket, and sort of expects me to be there."



David looked at his daughter. "Uh huh."

He supposed he shouldn't be surprised. She was well into the age where the opposite sex changed from annoying to endearing. Still, like most fathers before and after, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointment and dismay at his children once they did begin to pull away. Especially where daughters were concerned.

They ate in silence for a moment, each alone with their thoughts. She felt a little bad at disappointing her father, but wasn't going to change her mind. It would be fun, and having a cute boy or two to look at didn't hurt either. Furthermore, her father hadn't said no.

"Hey, maybe we can all go," Nathan spoke up. Helen and their parents looked at him.

"There's food there too, after all," Nathan pointed out.



"Overpriced snacks, maybe," David said.

Helen shook her head at Nathan, and mouthed the word 'no.' He kept talking anyway.

"It's not like it used to be," he continued. "They have burgers and pizza now. It's probably not that much worse than a smaller restaurant. Besides, you get dinner and a show."

"Like the cheerleaders?" Helen grumbled.

“You said it, I didn’t,” Nathan shrugged. Although he knew all about Tina Ward being head cheerleader. Everyone knew Tina, even those who, like Nathan, shared no classes with her. She probably barely knew he existed.

“Well, it would be something different,” Anna admitted.

“Oh, all right,” David said, reluctantly. He didn’t care for sports anymore than Nathan, and still considered the concessions overpriced. But the weather was supposed to warm up, and it wouldn’t involve reservations and waiting for a table. Besides, he found himself curious about the boy.

Nathan smiled at Helen. “Yay, sportball.”

Oakwood’s team, the Ospreys, faced Rodman’s team, the Muskrats, under the light of Oakwood’s

football field. As predicted, the weather was warm, and consequently, the seats were nearly sold out. But the other Paxtons still managed to get tickets, and Helen spent the evening going from her reporter's seat near the players to the upper bleachers where her family was. They had gotten their meals and were enjoying their food when halftime came.

The cheerleaders, led by Tina, ran out onto the field. As the band played a lively tune, the girls cart wheeled, back flipped, and made a human pyramid with the male cheerleaders at the base and their captain at the apex. Tina smiled radiantly before being thrown up and caught by two of the guys. Nathan, to his credit, stared, but not openmouthed.

“Osprey's eat rats!” the cheerleaders shouted.

“Rodman rats!”

The Oakwood parents and fans laughed and applauded. 'Rats' was the nickname Oakwood students had given the Muskrats long before any of them had been there.

"Oh, they shouldn't say that," Anna complained. "That's so rude."

"Now, mother, they're providing a very useful service," Nathan said. "They're spreading awareness that Rodman sucks."



"Ohh!"

Anna had been born in Rodman. If not for the indifference of the men in her life, they could have been a house divided, indeed.

The players ran back onto the field. Helen saw Mike, and he smiled and waved at her.

She waved back, and Anna raised her eyebrows. "Is that the boy who gave you the ticket?"

“Yeah,” Helen confirmed. “His name’s Mike.”

She took a burger from their tray and took a large bite to avoid answering questions. Not that she was especially worried about her family embarrassing her. They were all usually pretty laid back, except when concerned or upset with something. Still, she felt a little self conscious. She was definitely attracted to Mike, but didn’t want to look overeager. That would just be embarrassing. On the other hand, she didn’t want to appear indifferent, or worse, standoffish. What was the right level of interest to show?

While she chewed, Nathan filled their parents in.

“He just moved here from Rodman,” he told them.

“Seems nice. I have psychology with him.”

“Uh huh,” David said. Luckily, he said no more, and watched the next play begin.

Anna smiled at her daughter. “Do you like him?”

Helen swallowed. “Mom, I don’t know him. Not yet. Like Nathan said, he seems nice.”

“He likes you. I can tell.”

She finished her burger. “Well... I better get back to my seat.”

She hurried back to take notes. If she wrote her article over the weekend, she would have it well in time for Monday. She pulled out her camera to snap a few pictures as well.



The Ospreys won, and the fans cheered. The crowd pressed in around Helen to shake the hands and slap the backs of their hometown heroes. Mike himself had played well, scoring a touchdown, although the winning play was done by Kevin.

“This guy!” Kevin hollered to the crowd, slapping Mike’s back. “Secret weapon!”

“Not secret anymore,” Helen said with a smile. She got a picture of Mike and Kevin as her family filed in behind her. Helen introduced them.

“Good job, son,” David told Mike.

“Yes sir. Thank you sir,” Mike answered, toning down some of the enthusiasm to make a good impression. If David noticed, he didn’t comment on it.

“I’ll see you in class, Nathan,” Mike told her brother, who nodded.



All in all, a good evening for everyone.

Helen got a good article out of it, as well as a good grade. She started making a point of going to the games on a regular basis, even when she didn't have to cover it. Afterwards, she and Mike would hang out with Kevin and Kathy. Then, hanging around the games turned into hanging around at her house.

While Mr. Paxton didn't especially like boys coming over to see his daughter, Mike and Nathan really did share the group project. So it was easy enough for them to study while she stayed in the room.

To her relief, it turned out that Mike and Nathan found a rapport. Mike was far more tolerant than Kevin, or most people, of Nathan's occasional moodiness and the body of trivia he sometimes volunteered. He even found some of Nathan's reading and random thoughts interesting.

“So there are four basic personalities, according to this questionnaire,” Nathan began, looking at their project. “Outgoing, introverted, leader, follower. Or, sanguine, melancholy, choleric and phlegmatic.”

“Where do they get those names?” Mike asked, chuckling.

“They go back to the Middle Ages,” Nathan said.

“People used to believe that the body had four ‘humors’ flowing through them, and that health was a matter of those humors being balanced or unbalanced. Sanguine was blood, cholera was bile, phlegm was lung and spinal fluid, and melancholy was black bile. The idea started with the Greeks and didn’t really end until microscopes and germs were discovered...”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Mike interrupted.



Nathan shrugged. “I read and hang out at the library a lot.”

“Sometimes you’re antisocial,” Helen said. She was seated at the table with them, listening in.

“No, I’m not,” Nathan replied. “I’m nonsocial. Antisocial makes it sound like I want to hurt animals and children, which I don’t. Anyway, one of our grandpa’s was the town librarian, so I spent a lot of time there from

an early age. In fact, my full name is Nathaniel Hawthorne Paxton, after the writer."

"Mine's Ray," Mike said. "So, what's Helen's?"

"None of your business," Helen said warningly.

"O'Loy," Nathan answered for her.

"Nathan!"

"What?"

Mike laughed.

"Grandpa liked science fiction and the old weird tales," Nathan explained. "Helen O'Loy, by Lester Del Rey, was about an android that fell in love with her master."

"It's stupid," Helen grumbled. Unlike Nathan, she wasn't a big reader and preferred the real world to fantasy.

"It's a classic," Nathan protested.

"Hawthorne!"

Nathan shrugged. "Doesn't bother me. I like my name."

On another occasion, they discussed their futures. Helen told Mike about their father's business and how Nathan had had to get another job first. She had looked around and would probably get something over the summer.

"I haven't had a job yet," Mike confessed. "My parents have the attitude that kids should enjoy being kids while they can. Besides, football takes up most of my time as it is."

"Dad could use some help on weekends next summer," Nathan suggested. "When the college kids are moving back home. Maybe you could ask him for some hours then."

"Maybe," Mike agreed. "Is he around this weekend?"

"Actually, he's helping me with my Eagle Scout project," Nathan told him. "See, to get Eagle Scout, you have to set up and carry out a project that benefits the community. Shows you can be a leader."

"Yeah? What are you going to do?" Mike asked.

"There's a neglected cemetery a few miles from Oakwood," he continued. "Where Mooresville used to be. Dad took Helen and I there once, because we have a set of great grandparents buried there. Anyway, I checked with the county, and got permission to clear the weeds and rebuild the stone wall. Dad got a quarry to donate some stones and we're going to pick them up Saturday."

"Well, that's an odd way to spend the weekend," Mike confessed. "But if you need the help, I'm in."

The weekend came, and as promised, Mike followed the Paxton's truck to the quarry. Nathan and some members of his troop were already there, and by the time Mike pulled up, the stones were in a neat pile, ready to load.

It was hard, but they managed, and then the caravan of cars headed to an out of the way spot that had once been a town. Mike had heard of Mooresville, but had never been there. It was in a field that had been cleared out in the middle of the woods. But the town had declined over the decades and abandoned in the late 1960's. Now all that remained was the graveyard and a few foundations.

Mike joined the Paxtons and scouts as Nathan passed out work gloves. They spent the better part of the afternoon clearing away brush and laying it to the side. Then, it was time for the stones to come out.

Luckily, Nathan had never intended for all the work to be done in one weekend. So, it was just a matter of unloading.

"Come on over here," David Paxton told his children and Mike. "I want to show you grandma and grandpa's grave."

"Dad, we've seen it before," Helen protested. "It's getting late. Can't we go?"

The other scouts were leaving already. Besides,  Helen didn't like cemeteries. They were creepy and depressing to her. She had only come out for Nathan's sake.

"It's all right. I'd like to see," Mike told her. He was still trying to make a good impression on her father. Having summer hours and extra spending money would be nice. To say nothing of the fact that he was dating Helen.

David didn't look entirely convinced, but nodded his thanks. He led the three young people to the graves of a Jerome and Shannon Moore.

"My mother, Jan, was born here, when Mooresville was still a town. These were her parents. They were among the last to leave. I remember going to some county fairs as a kid. Then, those started being held elsewhere."

He looked around the field, and then at them. "It's good to remember that nothing in this life is forever. Or a given. Every day is a gift."

"You all right, dad?" Nathan asked.

He nodded. "Another hard night. Don't worry about it. You can't understand."

David forced a small smile. "I'm proud of you for the work today. And Mike, good job. If you need any spending money, let me know. Especially this summer."

"I'll do that. Thank you, sir."

Helen walked Mike to his car. "I appreciate it too, Mike," she told him when they were away from David and Nathan. "It means a lot to me. Helping my family, I mean."

"Sure."

He leaned in, and kissed her. She felt surprise, but wasn't displeased. He hadn't kissed her yet, despite several casual dates. It was her first kiss as he was her first real boyfriend.

"Mike?" she asked, somewhat timidly when he pulled away.

"Mmm?"

"Why do you like me?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'm no one special. And you...well, you're the

school's secret weapon. You could date anyone you want."

He laughed and hugged her. "Don't sell yourself short, Helen. I've seen how you are. You keep an eye on your family. You're kind and thoughtful. You're more important than you realize."

She felt herself reddening. Again, she wasn't at all disappointed. He kissed her again.

"Besides, you're also very pretty."



The horn of the moving truck sounded. Nathan and David were getting impatient. Well, her dad was, at any rate.

She drew back and ran a hand through her hair.

"Well, better go before dad gets his shotgun."

"My intentions are pure," he shouted at the truck.

She laughed at him. "Yeah, right. See you Monday?"

"Oh, yeah."

She walked to her family truck as Mike got in his own car and drove away.

That evening, Helen was in her room, getting ready for bed, when she heard a faint knock on her door. She opened it to find Nathan there.

"Hey. What's going on?" she asked.

"Just wanted to say thanks again for helping,"

Nathan said. "And for getting Mike."

"Sure. But I didn't really. Why don't you thank him yourself?"

"I did. It's just that..."

He trailed off. "You're lucky to have him."

"Thank you."

"No, really. How, um..." He reddened. "I wondered...how did you get together the first time?"

Who asked who?"

"Why?"

"The winter dance is coming up and I was thinking of asking Tina out," he said quickly. "But, well, I've never been good at that sort of thing. The few times I have gotten up the nerve to ask someone out, I've been turned down."

She started to smile. "Nathan, are you asking me for advice?"



"Come on, sis. And don't tell me to just be myself. That's so corny."

"Well, it's a cliché because it has some truth. All right. Um, I don't know. Mike asked me out, so you probably can't be passive."

"Great."

"I mean, he just asked me plainly. Maybe you should too."

"Just be myself," Nathan said drily.

"Don't over think," Helen corrected. "Trying too hard to be smooth, or funny or cool just looks obnoxious and desperate for attention."

"I know, I know. But for people like Mike, it just comes so easily."

"So, practice. You may never be comfortable with it, but surely it will get better the more you try."

"So I just ask her?"



"Sure. Don't try anything clever or fancy. Just make the offer. The worst thing she can say is no, right?"

Nathan nodded. "I guess so. Thank you, sis."

"Good night, Nathan."

Unfortunately, saying no wasn't the worst that could happen. The next day, Nathan and Helen walked into the busy hall before first period. Students were scrambling

to get their coats put away while pulling out their books while chatting with their friends.

Tina Ward was at her locker, surrounded by her entourage of friends and sycophants. They were all chatting and gossiping away, reminding Helen of that old Winona Ryder movie. Why Nathan had a thing for her she'd never understand.

Nathan, however, squared his shoulders and walked right up to her. Helen went to her locker, fortunately in the same hall, and tried not to stare as she put away her own coat. Well, he was going for it. Good luck to him.

"Tina, hi," Nathan began as he gently elbowed his way into her circle of friends. They stopped talking and stared at him. The school was, of course, cliquish, not really having a bully so much as tightly knit social groups that ignored rather than ridiculed those outside. Still, this was 'weird Nathan,' and he was the outsider

everywhere apart from Scouting. So what had gotten into him today, they wondered.

"Uh, the dance is coming up in a few weeks," he began. "You going?"

Tina's jaw dropped for a second. Then she burst out laughing.

"You? Oh crap, I can't believe you asked me that!"

She kept laughing, and several of her friends did too. Outside the friend circle, some other students snickered, some looked embarrassed for him, and others just shrugged. His fault for being so brazen.

Not like the whole school reacted. Tina wasn't so loud as to be heard over the general hum of conversation. But it may as well have been, especially since the whole school would no doubt be informed of it before the first lunch.

Nathan turned beet red, his face mingled with anger and hurt. He turned and pushed through the crowd, unfortunately drawing more attention than if he hadn't. Helen watched him go, dismayed at both the rejection and the humiliation.

"Hey! Tina Ward!" She found herself shouting. And she was loud enough to carry over all the other voices.

Nathan and Helen Paxton were Christians and regular members of their community church. They had learned at an early age the lessons of forgiveness and soft answers. Helen still called Tina a name that none of the apostles would have approved of, let alone the Savior.

Then the homecoming queen, class president, and golden girl turned as red as Nathan. There were collective gasps and 'ooohhs' as Helen chased after Nathan. Tina was yelling something and her friends

were holding her back. Helen heard a few words like 'not worth it,' and 'just weird Nathan's little sister,' but Helen had made her point. Now she just wanted to get to Nathan. Mike was right; she did look out for him. Especially when she felt the whole thing was her fault. She shouldn't have said anything to him last night. Who was she to advise her older brother on anything? But, no matter what, like it or not, they were blood.

Nathan had ducked down the hall leading to the gymnasium. He stood at the balcony, watching the first period gym students coming out of the locker rooms and warming up. He was blinking rapidly, as though trying to blink back tears.

"Nathan," she called out. Nathan looked up, frowned, and started to walk away, hands in his pockets. She caught up and hugged him, but he shrugged her off.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry."

He looked off to the side and down. "Not your fault."

"You sure? I mean, I..."

"Forget it. Go to class."

The warning bell rang. Nathan walked off. He hadn't even gotten to his locker yet.

"Well, what about you?" she called out.

He shrugged, but neither turned around nor said anything. She hurried to her first period. Knowing her brother, he would walk around aimlessly, maybe even skipping first period altogether. Whenever he became very angry or upset, Nathan would go off wandering by himself. Even when they were small, Nathan would never threaten to run away. He'd just do it, and come back whenever he felt like it.

The lunchroom was buzzing when Helen stepped forward from the line to the cafeteria. She largely ignored them. After all, what more was there to say about it all? What was done was done.

Mike sat down beside her. "Hey. What happened this morning? Did you really call Tina a..."

"Yes," Helen said shortly. "Mike, it was terrible. Nathan tried to ask her out and she literally laughed in his face."



"Oh, crap."

"I know, right?" Why couldn't she just say no instead of humiliating him?"

"No, I mean..."

Mike pointed over her shoulder. Tina was approaching her, scowling. Behind her was Steve, her current boyfriend and yet another football player. Tina's friends beckoned her to their usual table, but she held

up a finger to shush them. She and Steve plopped down their trays with an audible clatter and sat down opposite Helen and Mike.

“We need to talk,” Steve began.

“Who do you think you are?” Tina broke in.

“Nobody talks to me that way! Just because I’m not interested in your kook of a brother, you think you can cuss me out in front of everybody?”

“Hey, look,” Mike said before Helen could reply. “No one thinks you’re required by law to date anybody. All right? But why did you have to laugh at him?”

“Well, I was shocked,” Tina protested. “People laugh when they’re surprised. Besides, why would he possibly think I’d ever say yes?”

“You know what?” Helen said. She had been trying to calm down all morning. Now, however, all her anger at the arrogant senior bubbled back to the surface.

“It’s your loss, not his. And you...you think you’re queen here don’t you? Just because you have no life outside of all the school stuff?”

“Now hold on,” Tina began.

“But you’re a fake, Tina! That’s what you are. And after you graduate, all your Heathers over there will be gone, too. What then?”

“I’m most likely to succeed!”

“Well, good for you!”



“Yeah, it is! I’m going places. You and oddball will be here in Oakwood all your lives.”

“Oh, so I’m a nobody am I?” Helen growled.

“Beneath the head cheerleader’s notice? Then why am I under your skin?”

“You still didn’t have to laugh at him,” Mike repeated. “What if you’d asked Steve out and he laughed at you?”

“Hey, leave me out of this,” Steve protested.

Tina looked at Mike and paused. Haughtiness notwithstanding, Helen did see a flicker of doubt in her eyes. As if she were considering whether her actions were justified after all. Mike held her stare, neither looking down nor challenging further. He just let her think about it.

“Well...all right, maybe,” Tina admitted. She turned back to Helen. “But that still doesn’t excuse you. Don’t you ever speak to me again.”

“Don’t worry,” Helen answered. “Why don’t you find Nathan and apologize to him?”

Tina glared at Helen for a moment. Then, she wordlessly picked up her tray and headed for her friends’ table. Steve followed after shrugging at Mike.

Helen took a deep breath. She was supposed to love everyone as a Christian girl. But some people went out of their way to make that hard.

“Hey,” Mike said gently, and put his arm around her. “It’s all right. Tina’s just a brat. Only worry about the people who matter.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Helen admitted. “And maybe it’ll work out. Now, Nathan won’t be pining after her. He can finish up his project. Maybe he’ll find someone else to make him happy.”

“He will,” Mike assured her. “If not here, then in college, or somewhere else.”

“Yeah,” Helen agreed. “Not everyone marries their high school crush, after all.”

“Well, some do,” Mike said, but Helen didn’t really pick up on it.

The weekend couldn't come fast enough. Fortunately, Nathan seemed better, and had the distraction of his Eagle Scout project anyway. The stones were stacked neatly on top of the old fence, both building it up and enhancing the overall appearance.

Mike had also come to help and had lifted more than anyone else. Helen admired how strong he was; it only made him more attractive to her. Nathan and David helped her mix the mortar and again expressed their gratitude to everyone. 

That evening, they invited the scouts to the marina for a party. Nathan wanted to thank all volunteers and celebrate the completion of his project. Going for a swim had seemed like a good idea. Although it was fall, they had had an unusually warm week. Indiana weather was nothing if it wasn't surprising and fleeting.

"The Moores, our great grandparents, started the marina and ran it for years," Helen told Mike as they watched the scouts jumping in the water. "Grandma Jan sold it off."

"Your dad didn't want it?" Mike asked.

"No. He didn't really want the liability. Or the customer service. He'd done some moving for students at the university and thought a moving company would be more straightforward."



"Not as much affected by the seasons," Mike mused. "I'm surprised something like this is even open as many months as it is."

"Well, not in winter. Not even in Indiana." Helen smiled. "But no, it could be volatile. It's almost gone under a few times."

"No pun intended?"

"Ha, ha. Luckily, the warmer months with the university have kept it afloat...kept it going."

She had almost made another unintentional pun, but Mike's grin stopped her.

"So, what about you?" she asked. "Have you figured out your plans, yet?"

He shrugged. "Not really. That's probably not good at this point. I don't know. Maybe I'll take your dad up on his offer. Maybe I'll play football professionally. Of course, that's like saying I'll be a rock star, isn't it?"

"You're good," she pointed out. "Really good."

"But not record breaking good. Besides, the talent scouts usually don't bother with a small college like Oakwood's. Which is where I'm going to have to go, if I go at all. My parents aren't rich, and I don't want to pay student loans for the rest of my life."

He looked at her, and then at Nathan, frolicking in the water. "You know, you're lucky. You and your brother have jobs waiting for you."

"I guess so," she admitted. "But we still have to put in the work. Both the hours and the business degrees. Dad's said over and over that he's not giving us anything if we're not responsible."

They sat down on the beach. It was getting late and the sun was beginning to set. Mike put an arm around her and she snuggled up to him. Neither had wanted to swim, and were content to just enjoy the late afternoon.

"I guess there's still time," Helen said after a moment. "All is before us, as Nathan said the other day. All is possible if we just connect the dots from present to future."

"That does sound more like Nathan than you."

"Well, I am a Paxton too."

"For now."

She looked at him and smiled. "Jumping the gun a little, aren't we, Mr. Ferris?"

"I..." he trailed off and blushed. Helen laughed and kissed him.

"No reason to plan the rest of our lives," she told him.

Helen stood in the living room. Her parents were there to see her in her prom dress. While only a sophomore, she had been asked out by Mike, a senior. Naturally, she accepted.

"You look wonderful, dear," Anna told her.

The doorbell rang, and David answered the door. Mike was there in a rented tux and holding a bouquet of roses for her.

“Good evening, Mr. Ferris,” he said. “Is Helen ready?”

“She is,” he told him, more shortly than he probably should have. While David liked Mike well enough, Helen was still his only daughter. “Come in.”

“Hello, beautiful,” Mike said approvingly when he caught sight of Helen.

She smiled at him and twirled around. Mike handed her the bouquet and noticed Nathan seated at the couch. Helen’s brother wasn’t dressed up, and had his nose in a book.

“Hey. You aren’t going?” Mike asked.

“Nope,” Nathan said. He looked up. “You two have fun.”

“I thought Sam Kitteridge was going to ask you out.”

“She’s just a friend, and emphasized that it would only be the prom, nothing more. So I said no.”

He was still hurt from the Tina situation. Even earning Eagle Scout had only partially cheered him.

“Well, all right,” Mike said.

Nathan stood up, gave his sister a hug and shook Mike’s hand. “Have fun,” he repeated. “You make a good couple.”

He went upstairs before Mike could reply.

“Don’t be out too late,” Anna told them. She took the flowers from Helen to put them in a vase.



Mike opened the door for Helen and offered her his other arm.

“Such a gentleman,” Helen teased, taking his arm.

“Drive carefully,” David called after them.

“Yes, sir,” Mike said over his shoulder.

He led Helen to the passenger’s side of his car.

“Sorry, I don’t have a limo,” he told her, opening the door. “Budget ran out.”

“It’s all right,” she assured him. “Everything’s great.”

Mike took a glance back at the house. David and Anna waved and shut the door. His cheerfulness wavered for just a moment as they got in the car. “Everything?” he asked. “How about Nathan? He seemed pretty bummed.”

“Well, he probably is,” Helen confessed. “But he’ll be all right.”



“If you say so.”

They pulled out of the driveway and drove to school. It was spring and, consequently, the weather was warming up. The days were lengthening; it was still dusk rather than the pitch black of winter evenings.

The school gymnasium was bathed in soft light as power ballads played over the loudspeaker. They were a little late, and found that the prom king and queen had

already been selected. To Helen's annoyance, but not her surprise, Tina and Steve were the recipients.

They danced in the center of the gym, spotlights on them. Helen tried to ignore her as Mike led her in the dance. For several songs, she almost had forgotten about both Nathan sitting home alone and the girl who had spurned him.

Then, the prom queen and king decided to take a break. Stepping off the floor, they walked past Helen and Mike. Tina made the point of elbowing Helen as she passed.

"Hey! Excuse you!" Helen protested.

Tina didn't turn around, but did acknowledge Helen with one finger.

"Ohh!" Helen fumed, and then put a hand over her forehead and eyes. "Geez, I sound like my mother."

Mike chuckled, pulled her hand away from her forehead and kissed it. "Hey, at least she didn't dump pig's blood on us."

"That Tina," Helen grumbled. "What do guys see in her anyway?"

"Well, I'm seeing something a lot better."

He always knew what to say.

"Here. Let's just keep dancing," Mike suggested.

The next song came on. They danced for several minutes. At first, Helen was moving stiffly, still angry. But under Mike's gentle direction, she began to loosen up and relax. Her anger ebbed away, replaced with something else. A feeling, and yet, she wouldn't call it just a feeling.

She looked at Mike, who smiled back. "Better?" he asked.

She nodded. "A little."

He twirled her around and pulled her closer. "How about now?"

"Better."

He leaned in for a kiss. "Now?"

"Better still."

He embraced her gently, but firmly. She hugged him back, and they swayed together on the dance floor. Mike bent his mouth to her ear.

"I love you, Helen," he whispered.



She drew back, to look at him. His dark eyes shone with tenderness and warmth. Here was the look of a young man completely devoted to her. One who would never hurt her or want to see her hurt. One who wanted to be with her, care for her, do anything for her.

"You love me?" she echoed. She had heard clearly, but wanted to hear it again. To compare it with what she herself was feeling.

They had been dating for the better part of the school year. Was that long enough for love, real love, to form? She didn't believe in love at first sight, like in movies. That just seemed like infatuation. Actual love required that one know, really know the other person. Did they? Were they still too young? How could she tell, particularly for the first time?

She reflected that her thoughts were not unlike a discussion with Nathan. I guess I'm a Paxton after all, she thought.

"I love you," Mike repeated, slower and more emphatically.

His confirmation, his confidence, banished her doubt.

"I love you too, Mike."

Helen and Mike didn't get home until about eleven. After walking her up to her door, giving her a kiss and another declaration of love, she went inside. The evening had been so bright, so wonderful.

By contrast, the inside of her living room was dark and somber. Her parents had already, surprisingly, gone to bed. Nathan was lying on the couch, watching an old rerun of Star Trek.

"I'm home," she called out, not too loudly, though.



"Hey."

"I can't believe our parents are in bed."

"They have to get up early tomorrow," Nathan said, not looking up. "I promised to stay up and wait for you. How was it?"

"It was wonderful. He, Mike, he said he loved me."

Nathan looked up. "Really? He never said so before?"

“No, why would he?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. What did you tell him?
Do you love him, too?”

“I do. Yes.”

Nathan looked down.

“Oh. Nathan, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to rub it in.”

“No, I know. It’s okay.” He smiled weakly. “Hey, at
least one of us is happy, right?”

“Nathan.”



She took a step towards him. Then, she noted a
beer bottle under the coffee table. He stiffened when he
saw that she noticed it. She frowned, turned off the
television, and picked up the bottle. It was empty.

“Nathan. You know you’re not supposed to do this.”

He had snuck beers a couple of times before. While
she supposed most, if not all teenage boys had done
similar things, he naturally was disallowed from it.

Granted, he'd never been foolish enough to drink and drive, but still, it worried Helen. Especially since she knew why.

"How many did you have?"

He looked away, sheepish. "Just the one. I promise. Don't tell dad."

"If it was just one, then I won't. But, Nathan, come on. You're smart. You know you can't drown your sorrows."



"I'm not sad," Nathan protested. "I'm lonely."

He stood up, stretched, and began pacing. "I'm not jealous of you and Mike. I'm really not. Jealousy means you want to see something taken away from someone else. I'd never want that for you and Mike."

"You just want to find your someone."

"Yes. Exactly. Is that so unreasonable?"

He shook his head, bitterly. "I guess it is."

“Nathan, come on. You’re eighteen. You have your whole life ahead of you. You’ll find who you’re meant to be with when you’re supposed to find her.”

“You don’t know that. No one knows the future. And, I’m sorry, but no, I don’t think there’s someone for everyone. The question is, is there someone for me?”

“Nathan, you just need to find someone who gets you. We all do.”

She went to the kitchen to throw out the beer can.

Helen thought for a moment before addressing her brother again.

“Look, you like books, right? Especially classics?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Why do books become classics?”

“Um, because people keep reading them.” He answered her in a tone telling her it should be obvious.

“Right. Lots of people read them. That means you’re not alone. She’s out there.”

She watched as Nathan processed that. She could see him considering, and finally starting to agree.

“You know what?” Helen continued. “It’ll probably happen when you’re not looking. When you’re not expecting it. I wasn’t looking for a boyfriend when I met Mike. I definitely wasn’t looking for him, specifically. How could I? I hadn’t met him yet.”

She smiled. “But, one day, he was just there. And things started to happen, and the rest is history.”

“Helen?” David’s voice called from the upstairs.

“Yeah, dad. I’m home.”

“Get to bed. It’s late.”

They walked upstairs. Nathan gave her a hug before retiring to his own room. “Thank you, sis.”

“Any time.”

He went in and shut the door. Helen went to her own room, and flopped on her bed. Smiling at the ceiling, she reflected on how the future awaited them all.

2002

Nathan and Mike sat at a small picnic table eating grilled hamburgers. It was a warm summer day, and one of Oakwood University's fraternities had thrown a cookout at the university's small park. Although neither wanted to join any fraternity, they decided to go and enjoy the last weekend before classes started.

A Frisbee sailed towards them to land at their feet. Nathan picked it up and threw it back at a girl playing with the fraternity's mascot dog. She smiled in gratitude, and Nathan smiled back, although he didn't try to strike up a conversation.

“Hey guys.” They looked in the other direction, and saw Helen walking up. “What are you doing here?”

“Just trying to take it easy before getting back to school,” Mike said. “Nathan would never relax if I didn’t take him to these things.”

“Mike here has kept me sane all though college,” Nathan remarked.

Helen laughed. “Are you sure?”



Mike grinned, and reached out to brush a few strands of her hair behind her ear. “You’re cute when you’re snotty.”

She blushed, and Nathan decided to change the subject. “Did you manage to get in the class that was closed?”

“Yeah, the department head was in his office, so he let me in,” she replied. “He says that people start dropping after a week or so anyway.”

“Which class was that?” Mike asked.

“Dr. Ash’s.”

“Ugh.” Mike made a face. “Mister ‘students aren’t my priority’”.

“If he had his way, he’d only do research,” Nathan explained. “He only teaches because he has to. But his class is required, so you’re stuck.”

“Well, you all made it,” Helen said.

“But we don’t like to think about it,” Mike answered, giving her his best painful look. “Thank goodness we’re seniors. By the way, Nathan, did you ever get that last elective taken care of?”

Nathan nodded. "I'm taking Ancient History 109 with Professor Beaumont. It sounded interesting."

Helen came back home from college to find Nathan seated at the table looking over some of his own notes. He glanced up and nodded.

"Hi, sis. How was it?"

"Dr. Ash is as charming as you made him out to be," she remarked.



"Why do you think I add 'hole' after his name?"

"Don't be crude."

"Just keep your head down and don't ask questions. He thinks all questions are stupid."

"What about the teaching assistants?"

"Depends. Some are just as bad. Others still remember when they were mere mortals like us."

"Nice. What are you studying now?"

"That history elective I was talking about. Professor Beaumont's. Lots of religious and mythological commentary in his notes. Turns out that he and his wife also wrote large parts of the textbook under pseudonyms."

"Huh," Helen grunted. "I thought academics had to publish or else."

"You mean publish or perish," Nathan corrected.

"But he has tenure, so probably isn't worried about that." 

"Controversial then?"

"No, the Beaumonts are well regarded for the most part," he told her. "They aim to teach people to think and not just train them for a job. Of course, the people who only want job training think it's a waste of time."

He read Helen a passage on worldviews, both individual and societal. "“Everything one does, says or

thinks depends on the worldview one holds. On the societal level, the worldview of the majority will condemn or justify wars, movements, and trends within the culture.'"

"Sounds right up your alley," Helen remarked.

"Yeah. I think it's going to be fun." Nathan said.

A couple months later, Nathan and Mike invited Helen along to meet the professor. Not that they were the only guests. The Beaumonts hosted parties at their house every two to three months for their classes and colleagues. They enjoyed entertaining and since each only taught one class a semester, they felt it was a good way to get to know their students without the number of guests getting out of hand.

The Beaumonts lived in a large colonial home in a nicer neighborhood than the Paxtons lived in. That

didn't seem to matter though, because when they knocked, Professors Charles and Sherri Beaumont answered personally, smiled warmly, and shook all their hands.

"Nathan, Mike! Wonderful to have you here. Please come in. And you are?"

The last question was directed at Helen, who introduced herself.

"Ah, of course. You look like your brother," Charles nodded. "The same beautiful eyes."

"Like Bronwyn in the epic," Sheri agreed, although Helen didn't get the reference until much later.

Both of them were dark haired, dark eyed, attractive and genial. Helen would eventually learn that Sherri's family was originally from what was now Iraq, although they had immigrated to America back when it was still

under Ottoman control. Long before the current war on terror that had been all over the news for the past year.

The destruction of the World Trade Center and subsequent military buildup had shaken America to its core. Even small towns like Oakwood had felt it. She figured that, like those old enough to remember President Kennedy, it would be a day that everyone would remember. They would always recall where they were when they heard the awful news.



But that now seemed far away, and the guests were shown to the table and encouraged to eat. Kathy was there, along with Kevin. The latter hadn't bothered with college, instead getting a truck driving job. Kathy was in the same major as Nathan and Mike.

Her friend was dressed in a new gown and looked lovely, despite the fact that she had gotten into the habit of wearing too much makeup. Helen suspected that

Kathy wanted the feminine look to counter the rough and rugged feel of the truckers and servicemen who made up most of the people in her life. Frankly, Helen thought, she overcompensated. But, whatever made her happy was fine, she supposed.

Right now, Kathy was very happy. Before Helen could say anything, she held up her hand to reveal a ring with a large diamond.

"Kathy? Congratulations!"



Helen was nearly tackled by Kathy, who squealed like a tween, and hugged her tighter than even Mike had.

"Hey, that's great news!" Mike smiled, shaking Kevin's hand.

"You're going to have to be in the wedding," Kathy chattered, taking Helen off to the side. Glowing and

talking a mile a minute, Helen almost forgot Nathan, who had hung back.

But her brother soon had a distraction all his own. For another woman had entered the room, one who stood out from all the other guests.

She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman any of them had ever seen. Long black tresses framed a sweet oval face blessed with a flawless complexion. Eyes just as black, filled with intelligence and kindness, swept the room, taking them all in. She smiled, revealing perfect teeth and lips that were full without being oversized. Tall, slender, but still possessing a great figure, she seemed to almost glide into the room.

"This is my daughter, Elaine," Charles Beaumont informed them, stepping up. "She's a grad student in the English department."

He glanced at them. "I've been trying to get Nathan to switch his major. He has the potential to be a scholar. But..."

He shrugged, and mingled with the other guests. Nathan just stared, and Helen could understand why. Even Mike and Kevin stole a long look before remembering that they were already taken.

Nathan swallowed and took a step towards her. Helen and Mike exchanged a look of mild surprise and bemusement. Her brother hadn't had the nerve to ask anyone out since the Tina debacle. Luckily, she had made good on her promise, and left Oakwood for bigger and better things after high school.

Now, however, Tina Ward and the embarrassment associated with her were forgotten. Fortunately, while Elaine seemed a little reserved, Helen didn't get the sense of haughtiness that she had from Nathan's earlier

crush. Even if Elaine Beaumont turned him down, Helen doubted that she'd laugh in Nathan's face.

As it turned out, however, the two struck up a conversation and Helen found herself distracted with Kathy's wedding talk. Yes, the world and its troubles seemed far away indeed that night. There, only youth and love, old and new, could be found.

2003



As time moved forward in Oakwood, so too did it in the rest of the world. The war on terror escalated into a full scale invasion. Soon, thousands, if not millions of young men and women were headed to the cradle of civilization, not to see history, but to make it. While the need to was, and would be, hotly debated, the bravery and sacrifice of the young people could not be denied.

Kathy and Kevin married. Mike and Nathan finished their degrees and worked for David Paxton as full time movers. Nathan began dating Elaine, and she began to pull him out of his comfort zone.

The pair took trips to the big cities, saw concerts, water skied at the marina, and discussed Elaine's doctorate thesis in Old English. While quiet around most of them, the professor's daughter had an adventurous side that she seemed only to share with Nathan.



Although both sets of parents worried that they were moving too fast, Helen was happy for her brother. He was happy too, happier than she had ever seen him. Nathan had smiled more in the last year than he had in the decade before.

However, Nathan wasn't smiling one night when he came home for dinner. He still lived with David and Anna, saving up his money before he put a down

payment on a house of his own. David had allowed Nathan to do that so he wouldn't 'waste money' on an apartment. The Paxtons were firm believers in property, and Nathan hadn't been any problem. Until he was.

"So, we're going to war again, it seems," Nathan began as they ate.

David nodded grimly. "Looks that way. It's a shame. It never seems to end."

He sighed. "Nam. Desert Storm. Now this. Some of your great grandparents were even in the 'war to end all wars.'"

"Well, it was a good thing, wasn't it?" Nathan asked. "Heroic, I mean?"

"It's no adventure," David argued. "It's not like in the movies. People die in front of you, and they don't die quickly and cleanly either. You should thank God there's

no draft, Nathan. You're not an eighteen year old kid, but you'd still be young enough if there was."

"Like you?"

"Yeah, like me. Oh, I never tried to dodge. But believe me, I'd have never volunteered either. Especially if I'd known what I know now."

"So...I take it you wouldn't want me volunteering?"

David put down his fork and glared at his son, hardly believing what he'd heard.



"What? No, absolutely not! Why would you even think about that? You have a good life, a good job..."

He trailed off, seeing something in Nathan's face. Helen did too, and swallowed.

"Uh, yeah...I kind of already did," Nathan stammered.

"You're kidding!"

"Yeah, I'm well known for my jokes."

The flippant comment only angered their father. He stood up, and pointed at him.

"Well, you need to call them back right now and unvolunteer! What were you thinking?! What possessed you to do something so stupid?"

"Elaine enlisted," Nathan said. He stood up, not wanting to be talked down to, literally or figuratively. Helen and Anna found themselves in the no man's land between David's hot and Nathan's cold anger. No one was getting anything more to eat.

"So what is she thinking? And what's it to you?"

"Her family came from that area," Nathan answered. "She wanted to help the people there. They've lived under a dictator for years. Besides, it's where civilization began. To see it..."

"It's a war zone, not a vacation! Not an expedition."

"I know that!"

"So what's your problem? What's hers? You should be talking her out of it."

"Her minds made up."

"Why follow her then?"

"Because we're in love!"

That stunned them all for a moment. True, they had been dating for several months, but from the outside, it looked like they were just having fun. Obviously it had been more. Much more.



"I love her," Nathan said. He stepped away from the table. Anna and Helen also stood as David took a step closer to him.

"I'll do anything for her," Nathan continued. "Go anywhere with her. Give her everything I have, everything I am."

David wanted to talk his son out of the whole thing. To persuade him that what he wanted to do was folly, not

adventure. But in his anger, he resorted not to reason, but to ridicule.

"Do you hear yourself?" David asked scornfully. "You sound like a middle schooler. At your age! Why don't you grow up? You're really going to throw away your job, you life over a stupid girl?!"

Nathan lunged forward, and the women gasped. Nathan's hands balled and unballled at his sides, but he didn't raise them. Nor did he raise his voice. Still, Mr. Paxton stepped back, startled. He'd never seen his son so angry.

"She's not stupid," he said in the silent room.

Then he turned and went upstairs. They heard a door slam. Anna went to her husband while Helen just stood there, dumbfounded.

"Do something," Anna urged her husband. "Talk to him."

"I already did," he argued. "A lot of good that did."

"Well, try again. You're going to lose your son!"

"I've already lost him. Lost him to a fantasy."

"Maybe you should apologize for..." Helen began.

"You stay out of this!" David snapped.

That did it. Helen's lip trembled and she ran up to her own room.

"Helen! Helen?"

She didn't answer her father. Instead, she slammed her own door, and cried herself to sleep. Her whole world had unraveled in one night. War had come to America and worse, to her own home.

The next morning, Helen got up from a fitful sleep. She dressed for work and stepped out of the room, hesitant. What would this day bring? More tears? More fighting? She hoped not. She also hoped that once he'd

calmed down, Nathan would reconsider. Her dad hadn't handled it well, but it was true. Nathan didn't know what he'd be getting into.

She turned and looked into his room. The door was open, but there was no sign of her brother. A chill went through her, but surely, Nathan wouldn't have...

She ran downstairs to the kitchen. Anna was on the phone while David paced the floor.

"No, Ms. Beaumont, Nathan isn't here," she was saying. "No, he didn't leave a note or message. His car is still in the driveway, so...what? Elaine is gone? Yeah, they must have. Of course I will. Okay. Goodbye."

She hung up and looked at her family. "Elaine's gone too. They must have left in the early morning."

"Oh no," Helen said. "What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" Anna asked rhetorically.

"They're both adults. Besides, they're probably in

Louisville by now. Then they'll go wherever they're going to be trained."

"He's gone," David said. "What have I done? What if I don't..."

He cut himself off. Helen threw her arms around him, as did Anna.

"I'm sorry," he said. His eyes teared up, but he didn't cry. "Anna, Helen. I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm sorry..."



"It's okay, dad," Helen said. "He'll be back. He has to be."

But there was no law, physical, moral or civic that said so, and they all knew it.

David insisted on driving Helen to work. He considered taking off, but decided that it would be better to stay busy than stay at home moping.

“It’s what I did over there, too,” David told her as they drove through town. “I’d volunteer for KP, guard duty, you name it. Because when you weren’t trudging through the jungle, shooting or being shot at, it was slow and boring at the bases.”

He rounded the corner and pulled into their parking lot. Mike was already there by one of the trucks. He was smoking a cigarette, a nasty habit one of their employees had gotten him into. Mike insisted that it was better than coffee for waking up in the morning.

“Hey Mike,” David called out as they got out and walked up.

Mike waved and David held out his hand.

“Give me a cigarette.”

Mike’s welcoming smile turned to a look of confusion. “Huh?”

“Give me a cigarette.”

“Okay...”

He reached for his packet and Helen shook her head.

“Mike, don’t give him that.”

But David took the pack, pulled out a cigarette, and had Mike light it.

“Just be glad I’m not drinking,” he told her before she could protest further.

He, at least, walked far enough away that she didn’t have to smell it. Mike looked at her questioningly before putting his own out. She shook her head and hugged him.

“Oh, Mike.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Nathan ran away from home. With Elaine.”

“What? Why? Did they elope or something?”

She laughed humorlessly. "If only. They enlisted. They're headed to boot camp. Then to Iraq or Afghanistan, or who knows where?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't think Nathan knows. It was some impulsive idea of Elaine's, and Nathan just followed her. He said he's in love. He's never been in love before. Now...I just don't know."



Weeks turned into months. They did hear from Nathan. Not through a phone call or even letters. Just the occasional postcard telling them where he was. First basic training, then deployment.

A picture came of Nathan and Elaine in army fatigues sitting with their comrades. They had, in fact, been sent overseas to Baghdad. Helen felt mingled

pride, bewilderment and dismay. She didn't understand it. She only prayed that he'd return home.

Her parents kept the picture on the refrigerator. After David tore it in two and threw out the part with Elaine. As far as he was concerned, she would always be the siren who lured Nathan away.

Late summer came and saw Helen and Mike at the marina again. It had been a long day at work for both.  Helen was now working full time. While Nathan and Mike had taken over five years to get their degrees, having also worked through school, Helen had scrambled to finish and take over the office. David was needed to go out on jobs to pick up the slack after Nathan left. He had wanted to retire in the near future. A lot of that now depended on when Nathan returned.

She didn't allow herself to say if, inwardly or outwardly.

"Nice evening," Helen commented as they walked, hand in hand, down the bank of the Ohio. The marina was south of Matheson county, somewhat out of their way, but she didn't mind. It felt good to get away, even for a little while.

"Yeah," Mike agreed. "How long have they been gone again?"



"Five months, going on six," she told him. "It will probably be at least a year."

"A year from now or a year from the time they left?"

"I don't know. Why?"

He stopped and looked at her. A funny look, like he was uncertain. His eyes darted around, looking at everything around them. She felt his hand tremble, and she wondered what was going on.

“We need him back,” Mike said. “We all do.”

“Well, of course,” Helen said. “But you’re still doing a great job. And if you need a day off, we’ll survive.”

“I need him back,” Mike repeated. He let go of her hand. “I have a couple brothers, but he’s my best friend.”

He laughed and looked around. “You know, at first I only talked to him because I wanted to get closer to you. But he became a friend in his own right. I need him back.”

“I pray for that every night,” Helen said.

“I do too.” He reached into his pocket. “And I’m choosing to believe that he will be back.”

He pulled out a small black box. Helen’s eyes widened, as Mike knelt before her and opened it. Of course, it contained a ring.

“He’ll be our best man, if you’ll have me,” Mike said.

“Helen O’Loy Paxton, will you marry me?”

“Mike! Yes, of course I will.”

She had wanted him to ask, but knew she couldn’t bring it up or force it. Now, it had come and even the anxiety about Nathan and her family and the war and everything else fell away. The world was in turmoil and yet, this moment, this time and place, was exactly as it should be. She didn’t even care that he used her stupid middle name.

He laughed joyfully, stood and put the ring on her finger. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. When she released him, she held out her hand and admired the ring.

“It looks good,” she told him. “Mrs. Ferris sounds good.”

Mike grinned. "Well...you still can't change your middle name."

"Ohhh!"

He kissed her again.

2004

Helen and Mike stood in the Louisville airport with her parents. The Beaumonts were there as well. All of them had come for the same reason. Nathan and Elaine's tour of duty was over. They were returning alive and uninjured. All their prayers had been answered.

Arm in arm, Nathan and Elaine entered the baggage claim. Followed by other soldiers, they had no trouble seeing their loved ones. The other soldiers' families cheered and clapped. Mike squeezed her hand and she smiled at him. Someone had a recording of 'God bless the USA' and began blaring it.

Nathan and Elaine looked at each other and separated. She went to her parents, looking down at her feet as she passed the scowling David. Helen and Mike reached her brother before their parents did. Her eyes misting, Helen threw her arms around Nathan. She couldn't remember a time without him. Now, she didn't have to.

"I'm all right, sis," he told her. She looked at him, and mostly believed it. Still, there was something in his eyes, something that suggested he had seen things. Things no one should see. Things that changed one forever. But still, he was back.

"Mike." Nathan held out his hand. Mike shook it and pulled him in for a hug.

"I won't tell you to take care of her," Nathan told him, referring to Helen. "I know you will."

Helen glanced over her shoulder at the Beaumonts. She saw Elaine hugging her parents. She then saw a diamond ring on her finger too.

“Dad,” Nathan said as their father approached. Helen had wondered what they’d say to each other. Their last conversation had ended in anger and hurt. By the grace of God, it hadn’t been their last. Now, however, they had the awkward task of beginning their next.



They looked at each other, quietly, as though sizing each other up. Whether for another fight or not, Helen wasn’t sure. She hoped they could just let the moment be a happy one.

Slowly, Nathan raised his hand. He saluted David, as one veteran to another. David returned the salute, almost without thinking, despite not being in uniform.

“I...understand now, Dad,” Nathan said quietly.

David teared up, and crushed Nathan to him. “God, I’ve missed you,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I’m sorry. I’m so proud of you.”

Anna whimpered, and threw her arms around them both. Helen and Mike completed the group hug. A happy moment, it remained.

The Beaumonts and Paxtons ate at a nice restaurant before leaving Louisville. The soldiers didn’t seem to want to speak a whole lot about their tour of duty. Not yet, at any rate. What they did talk about were their plans for the future. Nathan, of course, would return to work, while Elaine wanted to finish her doctorate. They had left before her thesis had been completed.

“I haven’t told you much about my research,” Elaine said to them.

Helen blinked in surprise. “Well, no.”

“I majored in Old English. Before we were deployed, my thesis was translating Bronwyn and Lir.”

Elaine noted Helen’s blank stare, and smiled slightly. “It’s from roughly the same time as Beowulf, but more obscure. It was discovered far more recently in Kent, for one thing. Anyway, it tells the story of a Saxon warrior, Lir, who falls in love with a beautiful maiden named Bronwyn. He marries her and defends his people against invaders and monsters. Then, Bronwyn dies in childbirth. Devastated, Lir tries to bring her back, even resorting to black magic.”

“What happened?” Helen asked. She had never heard of the story, but thought Nathan would have loved it. That was probably what they had first talked about when they met.

“He managed to call her back from heaven. But she was angry at him for it. Then Death himself shows up

and Lir tries to fight him, but can't hurt him. Eventually, Lir is persuaded to reverse the spell. Bronwyn returns to heaven and Lir repents of his sins."

"Okay. Why are you telling us this, Elaine? Are saying keep God and Jesus first? I'm not worried about that. We already do."

"Well, that's part of it. But also...I believe there's truth to the story. Looking through immigration records, I believe that the settlers of Matheson County were originally from Kent. I think it possible that several of them, even you, are descended from Bronwyn and Lir."

"If they were real people," Helen answered.

"Well, as for something real," Nathan said. He stood, and helped Elaine to her feet. Holding up her hand, he displayed the ring that Helen had noted earlier.

“We’re getting married, hopefully soon. It will be a small ceremony, just everyone here. But we needed your blessing.”

The Beaumonts clapped and eagerly approved. Then they all turned to David. Elaine looked at her fiancé for a moment. Then, she went around the table to where David was sitting. She knelt before him and took his hand in hers.

“I know you don’t like me,” she said, quietly. “But we do have one thing in common. We both love your son, very much.”

David swallowed, looked down, and sighed. He didn’t meet her gaze, but instead turned his attention to Nathan. Then, he said what were probably the most difficult words that he could say.

“I...have no objections.”

David and Elaine would never be friends, although they would be civil to one another for Nathan's sake. Toasts, applause, and laughter accompanied the blessing, and Nathan was forever grateful to his father. Night had fallen before they finally made it back to Oakwood.

Nathan and David went to the back porch and talked for hours. Anna and Helen shared a coffee as the sun went down. It was a cool night, but none of them had anywhere to be. It was good just to have the family together again.

"Your dad still has dreams from time to time," Anna told her daughter. "Sometimes he'll twitch and moan in his sleep, and I'll nudge him and tell him he's still fighting the war. His war, I mean."

Helen glanced at the back door. "What do you think about Nathan?"

"I don't know. But I do know that he has someone to talk with, unlike David. I think it will be good for both of them.

She nodded, and finished her cup. "Yes. I think things will be different between them."

"Well, to be fair, people are treating these veterans better than Vietnam vets," Helen offered. "People  oppose this war, too, but not like the sixties."

"No, thank goodness," Anna agreed. "Those were hard times. Even Oakwood had some of that nonsense on campus. I never did understand how drugs and 'free love' were going to stop that war. Always seemed like exchanging one ill for another to me."

She stood. "I'm getting a shower and going to bed. It's been a long day. Don't let them stay up too late either."

"Okay, mom. Good night."

Helen hugged Anna and finished her coffee. After a moment, she went to the back door, and peered through, looking at Nathan and David.

They had pulled out a couple of lawn chairs, a radio, and a case of beer from the garage. What they had been talking about, she didn't know and never asked. It wasn't really her business and definitely wasn't her experience.

Now, they seemed to have finished talking, at least for the moment. Instead, they watched the stars and listened to the radio. The local rock station was playing Counting Crows' hit 'A long December.' Strangely

appropriate, given the lyrics about reflecting on a difficult past, but hoping for a better future.

They both reached for a beer at the same time. Father and son's eyes met. David took a bottle and raised it in a silent toast. Nathan smiled slightly, got his own bottle and raised it. They clinked the bottles together and drank.

The song continued to play. No words were spoken, nor did they notice Helen peering at them through the glass. A moment had passed between them. Two Paxton men, one aging and the other recently aged, bonding over experiences both heroic and horrific.

Helen stepped away. She wouldn't intrude on the moment with her presence or words. She would let it be and head for bed herself. Both of them would be waiting for her in the morning.

It was a beautiful sunny day when Helen and Mike were wed. She was in the dressing room with her bridesmaids. Mike's sister was putting some finishing touches on her dress while Elaine fixed her hair. She and Nathan had married privately a few months ago, with only their parents and Mike and Helen to serve as witnesses. Now she was returning the favor for Helen.

Kathy was doing Helen's makeup, currently applying it to her eyes.



"Use about half of what you use, would you?" Helen asked, as politely as she could. "I love you, but sometimes you overdo it."

"Picky, picky," Kathy replied, clicking her tongue. They laughed.

"I'm sure you will be his wildest dreams come true," her friend continued, pausing long enough to hold a mirror up. Without arrogance or false humility, Helen

decided that she did look nice. Maybe even more than she ever had.

“Still a little nervous, though,” Helen confessed.

“Any advice?”

“Two words. ‘Yes, dear.’”

“Seriously.”

“Just remember that you will have good and bad times in life,” Elaine spoke up. “There will be times you’ll never forget, and times that you wish you could. That’s life, but married life has it exponentially more than single life.”

She stepped back and let Mike’s sister start fitting Helen’s veil on her.

“Do you mean your service with Nathan?” Helen asked. “Or something else?”

Elaine paused for a moment, and Helen wondered if the question had been appropriate. Unlike David, Helen

didn't have anything against her. As far as she was concerned, Nathan had made up his own mind about following the professor's daughter into combat. Still, they hadn't really talked that much.

"Do you remember my research on the epic of Bronwyn and Lir? You remind me of Bronwyn. Your demeanor and physical features both. Bronwyn was said to have bright blue eyes and auburn hair."

Helen remembered Elaine's mother referencing the epic when they had met a couple years ago. Then Elaine had told them all the story when they returned from Iraq. Her sister in law was still composing the doctorate thesis on it.

"And your faith," Elaine continued. "Your quiet inner strength. You don't realize it, but you are strong. Stronger than Mike or Nathan, in a sense."

Elaine bit her lip. "I want you to promise me you will look after them both. Nathan, too, I mean, if something ever happens to me."

"Elaine, is something wrong?"

"No. Not now, anyway. Still, Nathan...he has the heart of Lir. Devoted. Passionate. And breakable. Don't let him break completely if his heart ever does."

Before she could question Elaine further, there was a knock on the door. Kathy opened it, and saw David there in his tuxedo.

"Hi, Mr. Paxton," she said. "You cleaned up pretty well."

He smiled. "Thank you, Kathy. Are you all ready? It will be starting any minute."

"We are. Come on, girls."

Kathy, Elaine and Mike's sister left. David walked in and kissed Helen on the cheek. She smiled and hugged him.

"Hi, beautiful girl. You made it."

"I did," Helen agreed. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I survived a war, didn't I?"

His eyes misted, though. "Look at you. Didn't I just have you handed over to me, a little baby? Where did time go?"

They heard the bridal march begin to play. Arm in arm, they walked out of the dressing room, down the hallway, and to the sanctuary doors. The ushers opened the doors, and down they walked.

The guest on both sides rose to their feet, as they do. Nathan and Mike's brothers stood next to the groom, her groom, as her bridesmaids looked on. Mike

was grinning ear to ear, and she never found him more handsome than she did now.

2006

Fortune, by its very nature, is both fickle and fleeting. A year of wonder was followed by a year of horror. Elaine's strange premonition became all too real.



At first, only a few acquaintances were sick. An employee of theirs called in, an elderly neighbor had to go to the hospital. Then, it got worse. People began coming down with respiratory disease. The doctors couldn't identify the pathogen or even if it were bacterial or viral.

One by one, people's lungs would fill with congestion, their energy would drain away, and their

organs would shut down. Elderly people, at first, were the most susceptible. Then it didn't seem to matter how old one was or how healthy they had been previously.

People began to die. Several at a time. The town government began to declare a state of emergency, and the state department of health got involved. They tried to close schools, order quarantines, but nothing worked. In the end, half of the town would be dead.

While Mike and Kathy's family suffered no loss, Helen and Nathan wouldn't be so lucky. The professor and his wife died.

Nathan had been one of the pallbearers at the funeral. Elaine had stayed the night before with Dr. Fowler, the professor's cousin and town minister, so that they could discuss his funeral arrangements.

During the services, Elaine had remained calm and stoical, standing apart from people, not out of arrogance,

but out of the desire to face her grief alone. Nathan, despite his own sadness, felt great admiration and attraction towards her. She faced her parent's death with more bravery than he ever could. Even in mourning, she looked so beautiful.

The funeral ended, and the Paxtons was about to leave, when Elaine approached Helen. Slowly, she put her hand on her arm.

"Would you follow us home, Helen? Please?"

"Yes, of course," she said. She and Mike followed Nathan's car to their home. They lived in the same house where Elaine's parents had. After marriage, they had moved in while the Beaumonts moved down to the first floor. They had planned to eventually get a condo or move to the retirement home in town. Now, they would be moving nowhere.

Nathan and Elaine got out of the car. They all went inside, and sat in the living room. For a while, they talked in low voices, wondering what was happening and how much longer it would go on.

Nathan saw Elaine's shoulders shaking. Slowly, he stepped in behind her, but before he could say anything, she threw her arms around him and started sobbing. All the grief she held back flowed out now, and Nathan saw the anguish she would show no one else. Wordlessly, he held her, fighting back tears of his own. Helen and Mike hugged them too, not knowing any more than they did what was happening.

A few weeks later, Helen's own parents were hospitalized. Elaine, too, fell ill and had to be admitted. Helen found herself at Whately Hospital daily, visiting all three.

One day, she and Nathan sat on either side of their father. The next bed had Anna's body, and they knew David was next. There had been so many deaths, that the funeral home in town had limited services to just an hour with no prior showing. The gravediggers were working overtime and the cemetery was filling up. It would be the worst natural disaster in county history. Even Covid, several years later, would seem like nothing by comparison.



"I'm sorry," David kept muttering, in and out of delirium. "I'm sorry. I've been a bad father, bad husband. I should've listened to you, Anna."

They hadn't had the heart to tell him she was dead.

"Dad, no," Helen said, tears running down her face. "You've done well. I couldn't ask for a better..."

He coughed and she leaned in to hug him. She wasn't even worried at this point about catching

whatever was going around. After a few months of this, she figured that it had affected everyone it was going to.”

“Love you,” David whispered.

“I love you, Dad.”

Nathan didn’t say anything. He merely squeezed David’s hand tighter. In the ensuing weeks, he had seemed to shut down as well. Not physically, but mentally. Almost seeming to run on autopilot, Nathan had started his days at work and ended them here.

They were actually making a lot of money, moving around the furniture of the dead. While it covered the medical bills, they still felt guilty and not a little ghoulish. Nathan was charging half rates to give people some relief, but still. Of course, they were suffering as much as everyone else.

David's eyes closed for the last time. Helen sobbed. Nathan stood, and saluted. He then gently helped Helen to her feet and held her.

"He's with mom, now," she said, between her crying. "And with God. But why, Nathan? Why is this happening?"

Nathan looked down. " 'Meanwhile, where is God? But go to Him when your need is desperate, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.' "

"What?!"

"It's from C.S. Lewis. A Grief Observed. When he lost his wife to cancer."

"Don't you have any words of your own?"

He shook his head. "We're all corpses. Some of us just haven't shed our skin yet."

He released her. "Go home, sis. Go to bed; I'll take care of the forms and sit with Elaine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

He hugged her, and kissed the top of her head. Then he stiffly left the room, not daring to look back. Helen, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

Somehow, she felt like she needed to. Wordlessly, they went into Elaine's room.

Nathan held Elaine's hand as her breathing became more labored, despite her weakened state. It was strange that she could still sound labored. She had lost both weight and hair, and seemed more like a skeleton than a woman. But her eyes still had a trace of the sparkle that appeared whenever he did.

Nathan swallowed hard. He loved her so much. Now, he knew she wouldn't last the afternoon. He had already called Dr. Fowler, and the minister was on his way.

"I love you," Elaine whispered. Her voice had become too faint to hear.

"Meanwhile, where is God?" Nathan repeated, his voice already breaking. Helen hugged him.

"Never lose faith," Elaine  said, shaking her head. "Please don't lose your faith...because of me...promise."

Nathan squeezed her hand. Elaine looked at Helen. "You...have the strength of Bronwyn. Remember."

"What brought that up?" Nathan asked.

His wife turned back to him and smiled weakly. "Heart of Lir..."

Before he could reply, Elaine gasped, and her head rolled backwards. The ominous whine of the life support announced her departure. Nathan staggered backwards in a daze. He couldn't really believe it. She was gone. After nearly two months of fighting she was gone. He felt like his heart had been ripped out and shoved down his throat. He could barely see ahead as he stumbled past the nurse's station while they ran into Elaine's room and paged overhead for whoever handled cadavers in a hospital.

Dr. Fowler, his minister, appeared in the hall, and ran to him. Nathan gave him a forlorn look that stopped him in his tracks. He coughed, and a tear rolled down his eye.

"When?" Fowler asked, hoarsely. He had been sick himself the past several weeks, but had been discharged back home a few days ago.

“Just now,” Nathan managed to say. He trembled as Fowler reached out with a compassionate hand to steady him. Nathan began to cry, no longer caring whether anyone saw him or not. Elaine was dead. What did anything matter now?

“Why did I have to see it?” Nathan asked. “Why did she have to linger?”

“I don’t know,” Fowler answered, crying himself. “We usually aren’t told why.” 

Helen went out to comfort him as well. Both she and Fowler helped Nathan into a chair. He just sat there, dazed, barely reacting, as forms were brought out for them all to sign. And he remained dazed as they had to start making the arrangements for both their parents and Elaine. And hear Dr. Fowler talking on and on, but he heard none of it.

The next morning, after a fitful sleep, Helen awakened in Mike's arms. He had been awake for awhile, but hadn't moved. He just held her in his strong arms. She leaned against him, letting him hold her. Sometimes, it was so tempting to just go back to being a child, and be held, while adults faced the evils of the world.

But, of course, she was an adult and had to go into work. She tried to get up, but Mike gently restrained her.

"Just call in, honey," he said gently. "You don't need to be working now."

"What about you?"

"I'm staying here for you. Whatever you need. I'm here."

She leaned into him. It was tempting. Very tempting. But the world was still out there, and the phone ringing announced its intrusion.

“I don’t have to get it,” Mike offered.

“No. what if it’s Nathan?” she asked.

He picked it up and listened.

“It’s not ending is it?” he asked her.

“What?”

He hung up and looked at her. “It was one of the guys at work. Nathan didn’t come in. They tried to call his house, but no answer. They’re worried about him...”

Helen was instantly on her feet and changing her clothes. Still tired, drained, saddened and now a little angry with Nathan, she nevertheless got ready to go look for him.

“Honey, I’ll go get Nathan,” Mike said. “Just...”

“No, we both need to look for him.”

“You don’t think he’d...”

“Don’t say anything. Let’s just find my brother.”

They drove to work and Mike took one of their trucks. Helen kept the car and they divided the town among themselves. She went through the drive thru and got a coffee to keep herself awake.

Thirty minutes became sixty. No sign of Nathan. She had searched all over town, and felt her irritation give way to worry. Where was he? What was he doing?

She began to pray silently, asking for a sign, a premonition, anything. Then, a still small thought found its way into her consciousness. She hadn’t thought of the location for a few years now, but unbidden, she remembered Nathan in high school. He’d been working on his Eagle project, restoring the old cemetery.

She turned and drove in the direction of Mooresville.

Turning onto the gravel road, devoid of any sign or name, Helen drove through the trees to the clearing where the abandoned town once was. Sure enough, she saw her brother's truck parked and undamaged. She gave a silent thanks to God for that much.

The county hadn't done much of anything since Nathan's project. The field was overgrown, and needed a bush hog to come through. Inside the cemetery, she could see weeds reclaiming the spaces between the graves. But the wall still stood, in relatively good shape. Nathan was sitting on top of it.

Helen parked next to his vehicle and got out. It was a cool grey morning, and a light breeze made her hug herself as she approached the cemetery. How she wanted to be back home in Mike's arms. She was tired, physically and mentally tired. She had lost both parents

in less than two days. Her entire world had been ripped from her. She just wanted Mike...

She paused. No, not her entire world. She still had her husband. The one who would always be there to love and comfort her. No matter what. And Nathan? His parents, too, were gone, and his in-laws, whom he loved nearly as much, and his spouse. His was the world that had been torn away.

With that realization, Helen approached him. At the side of the wall facing her, she saw a case of beer. Several empty bottles already littered the ground near it.

“Nathan?” she asked, gently.

He looked at her. Not moving, not speaking. He lifted a bottle to his lips, and took a long drink.

“Nathan, I’m so sorry,” she began.

“Yeah,” he replied, turning away from her. Helen walked up to the wall and put her hands on his shoulders. He angrily shrugged them off.

“Nathan, I...I...”

She trailed off. What could she possibly say?

“I can’t imagine how you must feel now.”

He didn’t answer.

Helen hoisted herself on the wall, and sat next to him. She didn’t know what to say, so she said nothing. Nathan finished the beer, threw the bottle down, and got another. Opening it, he finally spoke to Helen.

“Do you remember when we were building this wall?”

She looked at him, and nodded. “Yes.”

“I had accomplished my goal. Once an Eagle, always an Eagle. The future looked so bright.

Possibilities. Anything was possible; I just had to reach out and take it. Life, I mean.”

He took a drink. “But not now. Not like now.”

He hopped off the wall, inside the cemetery.

Chugging the rest of the beer, he used the empty bottle as a pointer, sweeping over all the headstones.

“Something to benefit the community. That’s what the project was supposed to do. But for what? In the end, for what? Time’s already undoing the work we did. Time wore down Mooresville until it was as dead and forgotten as the people here.”

He threw the bottle against the far side of the wall, shattering it.

“Who were these people anyway, sis? Were they good? Bad? Does it even matter?”

“Of course it does,” Helen protested.

“Oh, really? Why?”

“Some of them are our family. If not for them, we wouldn’t be here.”

“So what? They beget David and Anna, and David and Anna beget Helen and Nathan. Where does it end? What’s the difference? And even if we did do something great, what then? What’s Caesar now? Just a name, and nothing more.”

He began to laugh bitterly. “You know, Elaine loved English lit. I just remembered a poem by Shelley:



“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

That’s all of us. ‘Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.’”

He took a shaking step towards her. Helen leaped off the wall to steady him. She needed to get him home;

he was in no state to drive. They could retrieve the truck later. She doubted anyone else would even be out this way.

“And where’s God?” Nathan continued. “Where is He? Say something, sis. Anything.”

She held him, tears running down her face. She looked around the forgotten cemetery, as if imploring the dead to give her an answer. Her eyes settled on a grave with a cross.



“Right there, Nathan,” she told him softly.

Nathan turned his head, and looked at the stone cross.

“God is there, suffering too. Every hurt, every angry feeling, every sin or mistake. He’s there, suffering for it. Maybe, in a sense, He’s always there.”

Her voice broke, and she struggled to continue.

“But He didn’t stay there. And we won’t either. One day, God will come, or else we’ll go to Him. And then, even the worst life, the greatest hurt will just seem like a bad dream. A dream that fades in the morning.”

“Helen.” Nathan’s lip trembled. “Helen...”

Helen hugged him tightly as he began sobbing. She was crying, too, and the moment seemed to go on forever.

2028



“I got him home, and put him to bed,” Helen said to Kathy and Cal. “Then I went home after telling Mike he was okay. I think we both slept for the next day or two before having to bury everyone.”

She looked up at her companions, and then at the clock. “Oh. I’m sorry. I’ve been talking for hours.”

Night had fallen, but they were still alone. Kathy squeezed her hand in sympathy. Cal merely looked thoughtful.

"I guess I shouldn't have unloaded all of this on you," she told the homeless man.

"Don't apologize. Like Kathy said, you needed to," Cal assured her. "It's been a fascinating story."

"Really? Our life up to then seemed so ordinary."

"It's the ordinary that keeps the world moving forward," Cal replied. "Those who strengthen one another by love. Nathan was right; what does it matter whether your name is remembered afterwards? The kings and conquerors, to be sure, do much good or much evil. But they die, and fade away to mere names. Then, the ordinary come in to heal their damage or further their goodness. Always, it's the common people."

“The worst day of your life, whatever that was,” Helen said. “If you’re here now, that means you survived it.”

She smiled slightly. “Something Nathan told me once.”

And she remembered countless days. Years and years of reaching out to Nathan. Bringing him food. Talking with him. Keeping him company.

“Do you remember the aftermath of the epidemic?” Kathy asked.

“Yes. It was a horrible time. Just like losing Mike two years later, the town riot five years ago, and now losing Nathan. But there were good things, too. Neighbors coming together to rebuild. People comforting each other and helping each other,” Helen said.

“And watching our children grow,” Kathy said. “The town healed and we got to see the next generation.”

She smiled at Helen. “Mike Jr. is a good man, Helen. And he’s going to be a great dad. I know it.”

“Evil dies. Good endures,” Cal agreed. “And you were part of it. Especially because you know the Lord.”

“But...what did it matter with me?” she asked. “The world heals with God’s grace, sure, but it would’ve even without me.”



“Would Nathan have healed?” Cal asked.

“Well...I think he would have eventually.”

“Yet, it pleased God to use you as the instrument for his healing.”

Cal chuckled and shook his head. “People. You still insist on thinking that your worth is somehow tied to worldly fame and fortune. Isn’t it enough that you can be the good fortune of even one other person? That you

have fame in the heart of one? Haven't you heard of the shepherd going after the one sheep? Did it really matter whether the other ninety nine noticed or missed him? The shepherd did. The shepherd came to rescue the one as much as the whole world."

Cal stood up. Helen and Kathy did as well, and he shook their hands. "Thank you for your kindness. But now, I must be going."

"Will we see you again?" Helen asked. "If you come back this way?"

"In time," Cal said. "In time."

He headed for the door. Then, as he opened it, he turned to Helen one last time.

"Remember, Helen, your brother's last words to you. 'I know where I'm going. I'm not afraid.'"

Helen frowned. She hadn't told anyone that yet. The memory had been too vivid, still too raw to share.

“Wait. What? Hey, come back,” Helen called out.

Through the glass, they saw the man walking away. Helen followed, but as she stepped outside, something strange happened.

An ox was walking away instead of a man. She had blinked, and Cal Colon was no longer there. Instead, an animal walked in the parking lot. Then, it turned, and she saw a golden head and heard a lion’s roar.

Helen put her hand to her mouth, and she heard Kathy cry out. Then, she blinked again and an eagle was perched on the ground. Helen watched as the bird stretched its wings and flew off into the night. Dazed, Helen walked back into the service station. Kathy ran up to her.

“Did you see that?” her friend asked. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Helen confessed. She looked outside again, but the two women were now alone.

“I think it was a message. Meant to comfort.”

“Are you?” Kathy asked. “All right, I mean?”

Helen thought. “In time, I will be. The worst day of your life is still the one you got through. Even the worst days end, Kathy.”

She smiled slightly, thinking of the future, and grandchildren. “And goodness endures.”

